

one step heavy, two steps high

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one step heavy, two steps high

by [meridies](#)

Summary

George finds Dream in the middle of a wasteland, after being alone for months. Somehow, impossibly, they both survive.

Notes

prompt for today was apocalypse/injured au. this is heavily inspired by speech sounds by octavia butler and i highly recommend reading it at some point in your life, it's an incredible piece! enjoy!!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

The first day, he tries to cope.

Everything is a wasteland. The grass is scorched and dry. The streams are dried up, the water is stopped. Ash blankets everything. There's a heady, electric tension in the air that threatens *this will happen again*.

He finds a home with an air purifier, bottled water, and nonperishable food in the cupboards. He smashes a window to get into it. There's a bouquet of wilted flowers in a vase on the kitchen counter. Who were they for? A child's bedroom door is open. Their scribbled crayon drawings are crumpled on the floor, like the child tried to grab them as they were running away.

He picks one up, looks at it. Imagines that the shining sun in the corner with a smiley face is just as kind as the punishing, deathly sun in the real world.

It doesn't work.

It takes two days before he realizes that he should start rationing his water. Two water bottles in a day means that he will have forty eight days before he runs out. That's not even three months.

He starts by filling up the bathtub with water, bottling it, running all the sinks, collecting the water until it turns an ugly, rusting brown. It will have to do.

There's not much else he can do.

He thinks it's spring.

There are days when he sleeps through the morning and night, days when he doesn't sleep at all, days when he sleeps in hour long chunks, never quite being alive. The days blur, at this point.

It doesn't matter whether it's spring, though, because the sun isn't relenting, the heat is inescapable, all the water has turned to algae and mush in the faucets, he doesn't dare venture outside to try and find a supermarket that hasn't been looted and gutted to its barebones, he's running out of food, he only has his voice for company and some books to spare the boredom.

He misses the snow.

He goes to a supermarket.

It takes him a full day, a full daylight nighttime cycle, for him to steel up enough bravery to edge outside. He remembers the barest notes from emergency broadcasts that rang out so long ago, before things collapsed into pieces; long sleeves, gloves, a wide-brimmed hat. Still, the second he exits his house, his skin begins burning, like he's experiencing the most painful sunburn.

When he reaches the supermarket, his hands are blistered and raw even though the gloves. He doesn't even want to imagine what his face looks like. He's brought a backpack, the largest one he has, and shovels anything he can find into it. Deodorant, toothpaste, toiletries are a must. There's some nonperishables left on the shelves. He takes some high-calorie protein bars, snacks, things

that will keep him sustained. The water is running out, but he finds a water purifier that he can bring with him. There's gallons of bottled water, and he can lug two of those back as well.

For a second, he contemplates staying.

There's a noise from behind him, and he turns.

Another person is in the store with him.

The man's face is covered, just like his is. For a second, they stare at each other. They're both asking the same questions wordlessly.

How are you here? How are you alive? Are you like me? Do you know other survivors?

Can you help me?

Neither of them say anything.

He clutches his backpack close to his chest, carries the two gallons of bottled water, and begins the long, laborious trek back to his safehouse.

It's been two days and his hands are still raw to the touch. He doesn't risk washing them; he can't waste water.

He takes an alcohol swab and, gritting his teeth, cleans his burns as best as possible. Pain blinds him. It takes everything in him not to scream.

He gasps, hands shaking, forces himself to bandage them as best as possible. Nausea churns in his stomach. He spends the rest of the night lying on his back, doing his best not to move, for every movement sends white noise roaring through his ears.

Breathe in, breathe out.

The very air feels poisonous.

He wishes that the electricity would work.

There's a song stuck in his head and he doesn't remember the words to it. It had a nice instrumental to it, he thinks. He tries humming it out loud, then stops and puts a hand to his throat.

He tries again.

Coughs. Clears his throat.

Tries again.

Nothing. No sound.

He tries to say something, to say anything.

Anything.

No sound emerges.

Two days later he returns to the supermarket. There's a technology section to it that's been looted and burned, likely a long time ago. This time, he takes longer there, doesn't bother grabbing what he needs and leaving instantly. His hands have fared better this time, he thinks they must be more resistant to the sun now that they've already been exposed.

He creeps around, passes a clothing section, and stuffs socks, underwear, pre-packaged shirts, ties a jacket around his waist. He hasn't done laundry in a long time. There's a section full of school materials. He goes through them, finds an empty notebook and a package of pens.

At least he can write.

He doesn't see the man again for a while, and he thinks he's paced the entire length of the supermarket five times over before there's a slight rustle, and the same person emerges from somewhere.

They stare at each other again, for a long, long moment.

Neither of them move.

Finally, the man speaks. "What's your name?"

He puts a hand to his throat, and gestures. *I can't speak.*

"Can you write?"

He nods, scribbles his name down in large, loopy letters. It feels odd to hold a pen again. His handwriting is horrendous.

"George," the man reads. "I'm Dream."

George writes: *is that your real name?*

"Does it matter?"

It's a weird name.

"I know. I gave it to myself."

George doesn't write anything down, just stands there and looks at him.

"Can we just do yes or no questions?"

George nods. *Yes.*

"Have you been alone this whole time?"

Yes.

“Do you live close by?”

Yes.

“Have you met any other survivors?”

No.

If Dream’s face weren’t covered by a mask, it would have fallen. He looks down and away from George.

Hesitantly, George writes out: *have you been alone too?*

Dream laughs, dry. The laugh of someone who hasn’t laughed in many, many weeks. “Mostly.”

Are you living here?

Dream nods. Short and clipped. “I’ve been living here. I thought everyone else was dead. I didn’t think that there were any other survivors.”

George points to his chest. *Me. I survived.*

“You said that you’re living close by,” Dream says, and it’s almost desperate when he asks, “Could you— could you visit? More often? I just need to know— I need— that someone’s still here, that it’s not just me— please.”

George nods. *Yes.* He needs it just as much as Dream does.

It’s a promise that weighs on his shoulders.

Return. Return, please.

He returns back to his home and allows himself one full bottle of water, enough to barely quench the sucking, drying thirst inside of him. His lips are red-chapped and cracking. He should have brought chapstick back to his home. Surely there was chapstick at the supermarket.

He flips through the blank pages of the notebook. The pen wobbles in his hand. He hasn’t written in a long, long time.

He just wants sound. He just wants a voice.

He has a dream that he is the only survivor left.

He wakes up, gasping for breath, shuddering and wheezing and it takes everything in him to not retch over the side of the bed.

For the first time, the loneliness strikes him.

He has never felt more lonely now that he knows there are other people out there.

“George,” Dream says, “You’re back.”

George nods. *I’m back.*

“Thank God,” Dream whispers, almost to himself, “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

George finds himself just as grateful.

He flips the notebook to the words he had practiced writing, over and over until they looked like the letters he had learned in elementary school.

Can I stay?

Dream nods. He nods again. His face, if George could see it, breaks into relief.

“Of course you can.”

George flips to the next page. He had prepared two responses depending on Dream’s answer.

I brought some stuff with me. If that’s ok.

“It is,” Dream says, “It completely is.”

He stops, recollects himself. “Let me show you around. I’ve been here... three months? Four? I know it like the back of my hand.”

Dream’s bed is in a storage room. The shelves are empty, and there’s a mess of blankets and pillows and mattress pads in one corner. It looks comfortable.

“This used to be a Walmart,” Dream says, “It has everything you need. And the emergency generators are set to keep things going for at least a year. Maybe more.”

George sets his backpack on the ground. It thuds at his feet. He hadn’t brought much. Only the barest essentials. Some things that reminded him, desperately, of human life. A child’s crumpled crayon drawing, of stick figures and a smiling sun in the corner. Someone’s leather wallet on a bedside table, worn and smooth. An empty pill bottle for anxiety medications, a prescription that hasn’t been filled in ages. A silver spoon with someone’s initials engraved into the handle.

Dream doesn’t question it when George unloads these things onto the shelves. He barely glances.

“We can go grab you some blankets and things,” Dream says, and takes George by the elbow, “If you don’t mind sleeping in the room with me.”

George nods. *I don't mind.*

It might bring him some peace of mind to wake up and see another person next to him.

Dream makes peanut butter and cracker sandwiches for dinner.

They eat them in silence. When Dream sees George taking slow, tiny sips from his bottle of water, he pushes another one closer to George.

“There’s lots of water,” Dream says. “You can drink it.”

So George finishes a full bottle of water, for the first time in so long. He doesn’t think he realizes quite how parched he was until that moment. When he can peel his tongue off the roof of his mouth for the first time in days.

George summons the most basic scraps of sign language, and brings his hand to his chin and back out again.

Thank you.

Dream mirrors it.

They finish eating in silence.

In bits and pieces, the stories emerge.

“I haven’t been outside,” Dream says.

He has his mask off. Dream told George that he left his mask on when he saw George come in from the outside, because the air itself is poisonous, and he doesn’t know how much of it came in with George. Now that George has no reason to leave, Dream leaves his mask off. They both do.

Humans. The both of them.

George writes, *it's not very nice outside. don't recommend.*

Dream laughs. George smiles.

There’s a dim lamp in front of them, one of the ones that people use for camping. It runs on batteries, and by God, do they have bucketloads of them. Dream has the door closed to the storage room, so the only thing in there is them, a mess of pillows and blankets in opposite corners, precious possessions on the shelves, each other.

“I miss the fresh air,” Dream says, after a long moment. “I miss the sky.”

The sky does not exist. Ash rains perpetually. Coats the streets and sidewalks like snow.

George writes, *me too*.

They do not talk again for a long, long time.

George tries to speak again.

He goes to the bathrooms, looks at himself in the dry, dusty mirror.

He hasn’t made a habit of looking at himself much, because he’s part terrified of what he’ll find looking back at him in the mirror. But at this point he barely sees anything.

He opens his mouth, tries to remember how to form the shape of the word *hello* in his mouth.

He’s never had trouble speaking before. He’s never been silent.

Dream, who apparently had a friend with him for the first few months, probably talked all the time.

George tries not to feel bitter.

Hello, he mouths, and there’s no sound.

He tries again.

Hello.

Again.

Hello.

Again. *Hello*. Again, this time stronger. *Hello*. This time with volume. *Hello*.

Why won’t he— why can’t he— what’s *wrong* with him—

It’s George’s turn to pick out dinner, and he picks one of the few perishable items that they have.

Since the emergency generators are still going, hopefully as long as possible, the massive freezers in the food aisles are still operable. So he and Dream scourge through them and pick out two frozen dinner meals. They find a microwave, plug it in, and heat them up. Eat with plastic forks.

It’s so good that, Dream mentions, he can’t believe he’s never done it before.

George writes, *shouldn’t we eat some of the perishable things 1st? in case generators run out*

Dream nods.

They finish eating in silence. George has to hold himself back from licking the container.

It becomes a weekly thing.

They don't have the names for the days anymore, but every fifth day, they count it as a week. Every fifth day, they treat themselves to a full meal.

"It's raining," Dream comments quietly.

George has been teaching both of them sign language from a book they found. He signs, *acid rain*.

Dream nods. Neither of them can go outside, not anymore. Not when it is this dangerous, this deadly.

"Do you think we could purify the water?"

No.

"You're probably right." Silence. "It would be nice if we could, though."

He dreams about the rain. He misses it.

He catches Dream turning a white bandana in his hand, over and over, eyes to the floor. It's worn down to threads. George thinks that one wrong move would make the entire thing fall to pieces.

He approaches, and when Dream looks up at him, signs, *what is that?*

Dream folds it up, slowly, carefully, and tucks it inside the inner pocket of his jacket. Right over his heart.

"It's nothing," he says, voice thick. "It's nothing."

The strangest thing about being the only two people left in the world means that they have lost all sense of boundaries.

They talk about anything and everything under the sun. Anything that meant anything to them. Politics, opinions, things that they never wanted to say to anyone else. All the people they may have hurt or damaged. All the people they may have loved. It all comes rushing out, unfettered, unstoppable.

Dream, at one point, whispers a name in the dead of night.

Sapnap.

He doesn't go into detail.

George does not ask him to.

He notices, though, that Dream does not sleep at all that night.

George says, "Hello," to himself in the mirror.

It comes out hoarse and cracked and broken, more a wheeze than a word. But he clenches the ceramic lip of the sink so hard that his knuckles go white, and tries to remember how to breathe, in and out, in and out. Lungs, fill. Lungs, empty.

He tries to say it again, but it takes him fifteen more tries before he does it a second time.

He dreams about something he's never experienced.

There's a cabin in the woods, something with smooth, cedar floorboards that smell fresh and damp in the clear rain. The sky is blue, stretching for miles, only stopping when it hits the horizon line. In one direction is a grove of pine trees, the mossy ground springy underneath his feet, and on the other side is a slope downwards, leading into a lush valley, filled with waving stalks of wheat and grain. A river runs through, natural irrigation, and it sparkles in the sunlight. The cabin has paned windows that are cool to the touch, that open if he wishes them to, and allows air to blow through. The air is sweet and tastes clear.

There is nothing but him and the clear, vast, expanding sky.

Dream wakes him in the middle of the night.

He's grabbing at his blankets, hands shaking, illuminated slightly by the dim lantern they have in

the center of the room, and George can see the way his entire body is trembling from where he's curled up in the corner.

Dream's hands automatically go to his jacket, fumble for the inner pocket, and everything in him loosens, dampens, piece by piece. George stares and isn't sure what to make of it.

He moves, just slightly enough so that Dream knows he's awake, and makes eye contact in the dim light.

"Go to sleep," Dream croaks.

George signs, *are you okay?*

"Nightmare," Dream says.

Do you want to talk?

Dream blinks once, twice, eyes unfocused, and then shakes his head.

The first big scare is when the power flickers.

George pauses. His heart races faster than it's ever raced before. He sees Dream freeze, go completely still next to him. The lights pulse, on and off, and there's a distant humming sound that makes George's stomach turn.

Then the lights turn off completely.

"Fuck," Dream whispers, and nearly crumples in on himself, "No, no, no—"

George crouches in front of him, grabs his wrists to stop himself from digging his hands into his hair, pulls them away. Dream barely seems to notice.

"The lights," he whispers, "Please, I can't have it be dark, please, I need the lights on. I need to see. George, it's dark— it's *too* dark—"

George fumbles for the lantern, clicks the bottom of it, and watches their dim corridor light up with yellow light. Dream gets as close to it as possible, looks at his hands in the light, as if needing to make sure that they still exist.

George signs, *I'm going to check on the generators.*

Dream nods.

"Come back," he says. *Please.*

George nods.

I will.

The lights turn back on.

Dream, embarrassed, pretends like he wasn't panicking.

George understands. He has his own traumas. He understands why they never sleep in the dark, why there's always a light on somewhere. Why he finds Dream, sometimes, sitting in front of the freezer aisles, which have strip lights in the top of the freezers that never turn off.

He doesn't ask.

Dream never gives.

George dreams again about the cabin in the woods.

For some reason, he thinks he needs to find it.

"Hello," he practices saying, over and over, until he gets it right every time.

"Hello," he says again, and swells with pride.

He starts on the second word.

Two weeks later, George says, "Hello, my name is George."

All the way through. No inflections. No mistakes. Clear and smooth.

He thinks he'll say it to Dream soon.

Dream reacts exactly like George expected him to.

He hugs George so hard that George can hear the vertebrae in his back pop. He hugs Dream back, just as desperately.

George mouths, and signs along, *I can't say much else. But I want to.*

Dream nods, shuddering with relief, and refuses to let go of George's hand, his arm, and for the next six hours, Dream and George are always touching in some way. Shoulders together. Backs against one another. Even legs, stretched out in each other's lap.

He can't imagine what it must be like to Dream. To finally hear another voice, after hearing nothing for so long.

But he thinks he can try.

"The bandana," George says.

Dream looks at him, hand reflexively going to his inner pocket. "What about it?"

"Whose is it?"

Dream says, "Sapnap's."

George tilts his head curiously. He's heard the name before. Once.

Dream elaborates, "My friend. The person before you were here."

"Is he gone?"

As he says it, George winces at the bluntness of it, but his voice isn't made for more complicated words yet. So he sticks with the easy syllables, the ones that don't hurt or strain his throat to say.

Dream tucks his knees to his chest, turns the bandana over and over in his hands. "I don't know."

"How long?"

"Two months before you got here."

"Oh."

That's a long time.

A very long time.

He's gone, George wants to say, but doesn't. That's cruel.

"He's coming back," Dream says. "He's coming back." He doesn't even bother to look at George, only turns the white bandana over and over in his hands, "He's coming back, I know he is."

George says nothing.

Words, exchanged in the dead of night.

Tomorrow. Sunlight. Pastries. Apricot. Cyan. Grass. Fresh fruit. Bumblebees. Stars.

For the first time, George asks if he can sleep next to Dream.

Dream acquiesces.

It's odd, at first. Adjusting to the weight of another human's body next to yours, after so long of being alone. But there's only two of them, and there's a wide, wide storage room, and it's easy to change pillows out, switch mattress pads, cover themselves with different blankets until they curl into each other like clamshells. One leg, hooked over the other. A hand over someone's chest. Another hand linked with another. George can feel the beating of Dream's heart. It's slow, steady, unstopping. He puts a hand over it sleepily and feels the pulse of it underneath his hand. He counts them.

One, two, three, four, five, six...

He wakes up. For a moment, he can't tell which limbs are his and which are Dream's. They're so closely intertwined that it seems like they're one.

He doesn't move for a long, long time.

Over a night of microwave frozen dinners, George tells Dream the story of where he was when it first happened. How he recognized, somehow, that things were terrifying and wrong and that if he didn't find shelter, he was going to die. The primal, awful terror of knowing the apocalypse was among them.

No one else seemed to understand. And when they did, maybe it was too late to run. Or maybe people tried to run, but couldn't. That's what George suspects happened to the family whose house he stayed in for all those days. That they tried and failed. He's one of the lucky ones. He's the lucky one that survived.

Looking around, he's not sure whether he would count himself as lucky or not.

Dream listens patiently, doesn't interrupt, allows George to stutter over his sentences and go back to try and find easier words and repeat phrases and sound things out loud until he gets the word correct. He listens like it's the most interesting thing he's heard all day. Which, in a way, it is. The days are indistinguishable without the sky to tell them the difference.

In return, Dream shares bits and pieces of his own story.

It's funny, the way the human brain responds to the apocalypse. About anything else in the world, neither of them hesitate when talking about it. Sharing the deepest, darkest pieces of themselves.

"I think Sapnap and I knew something was wrong about the same time you did," Dream says. "We made it in here, luckily. There was a lot of looting, a lot of violence at first. Neither of us got involved. At some point things were empty, and we— we locked the doors."

Dream swallows, stares at the ground. "It haunts me. That decision. To close people out. Because as much as I like to deny it, I think that some of those deaths are on my hands."

George shakes his head. “You aren’t respon— responsible for that.”

“I could see them,” Dream says. “Outside.”

“Not your fault.”

He isn’t sure whether his words are helping or aren’t. Dream’s eyes are unfocused. He continues, “We saved and hoarded a lot of things. Kept each other sane, kept each other alive. And one day... one day he brought up wanting to leave. Not permanently, but just to see if there were survivors, if there were more people alive. I remember everything he said to me. That the guilt was eating him up alive. He needed to know if there were more people he could save.”

“He never came back,” George whispers, and knows it's the truth by the way Dream shudders.

“I have to believe that he will,” Dream says. “I know that he will. Because the second I stop believing that, he’s as good as gone.”

George doesn’t say anything. There’s nothing that will fix this. Nothing that will make Dream feel better without seeing Sapnap appear.

“I leave all the doors unlocked,” Dream mutters. “I leave them all unlocked so he knows how to get inside.”

George says nothing.

“He’s coming back,” Dream says, “I know he is.”

Neither of them say anything for the rest of the night.

The first time George brings up the idea of going outside, Dream stares at him for all of ten seconds before turning away.

“No,” he says coldly.

He doesn’t say anything for the rest of the day.

George misses the sky.

He has a dream about the cabin again, the cabin in the pine forest overlooking a valley. It keeps coming to him, surfacing to the front of his mind. A world where the sky rains clear water and not hazy, misty ash. A world where the water is pure and not polluted. A world with green, damp grass underfoot instead of a scorched wasteland where nothing can grow, not anymore.

He wants to be there. He wishes he were there.

George paces up and down the linoleum aisles of what once was a Walmart but has become a

home, thinks about how he hasn't felt the earth underneath his feet in what must be nearly nine months.

He goes to the carpet section and brushes his hands against them, just to feel the texture of it. Something different. Something that lets him know that this world that he's in is real.

The second big scare comes in the form of an injury.

Dream is climbing to retrieve a box from the large storage rooms in the back, the ones with towering shelves and giant ladders stretching far into the warehouse ceiling, and is there to get a box of nonperishable food items because everything on the shelves is starting to run out, when there's a crash and a thud and something breaks.

"Fuck," Dream swears, and George, who is on the other side of the supermarket, can hear him clear as day.

"You're bleeding," George says faintly, when he rushes over, and his panic makes him stumble over his words, making everything revert back to square one, and he can't focus on speaking as well as taking care of Dream, because his arm is bloody and one of his fingers is bent in the wrong direction—

"It's not that big a deal," Dream says, desperately trying to keep his voice steady, "I'm fine, I can walk, look."

"Sit down," George says.

"Jesus," Dream snaps, "Stop fussing."

George catches his shoulders, pushes him down. "Sit down."

"But—"

George looks at him for a moment, and whatever Dream must see in George's eyes, he relinquishes himself to it, and sits back down. He lifts his left hand into his lap, the one that's hurt, and George touches it gently, turning it over. He doesn't miss Dream's wince at one part, a swollen area by his wrist.

"First aid," George says, and points to himself and then the direction back into the supermarket. Dream nods.

He returns with a first aid kit, a medical carpal tunnel splint, some rubbing alcohol, and gauze pads. He is very grateful for how well stocked the first aid supplies still are.

Dream flinches away from the rubbing alcohol, grits his teeth at the sensation of it, and it reminds George of the pale, spotted scarring on his hands from exposure to the outdoor air and sunlight, and how much it hurt to take care of his own hands when it was just him, on his own.

"Stay still," George instructs, and when he tries to form the right words, his mouth gives out on him, so he signs, *don't get up and hurt yourself, I'm getting water and Advil*.

Dream tries, but his knee bounces up and down as George bandages his hand, splints two of his

fingers to the other, and puts the brace on his wrist. He watches and makes sure Dream swallows the painkillers George offers him. Then drink water. And after all of that is done, George trails after Dream to their storage room to make sure he rests.

Dream sleeps. George doesn't.

It has been a long time, a long long time, but George thinks that his voice may have returned fully.

They whisper to each other in the dead of night. George talks about his family. He hasn't thought about them in a long, long time. He's not sure whether he's grateful for that or not. He doesn't know whether he's glad that they aren't suffering like him, or sad that they're not here to provide him company.

George traces a circle into Dream's palm, around and around, and relinquishes himself to sleep.

The second time George brings up going outside again, it's in daylight.

George knows about Dream's fear of the dark. He knows that he's more antsy and uncomfortable at night. So he asks the question in broad daylight, when all the lights are on, when there are no shadows anywhere.

"What if we looked for him?"

Dream's back is turned. His shoulders tighten.

"Sapnap," George clarifies, though Dream doesn't need the clarification.

"I thought I told you to drop this topic."

"It's a thought."

"It's a terrible thought."

George doesn't respond, and watches as Dream tenses and then loosens, all in one swift motion. Like his brain is turning, tumbling over itself.

"No," Dream says finally, though with much less conviction than before. This time he sounds unsure, contemplative.

George leaves him to it.

They're down to their last twenty gallons of water.

George tries not to feel nervous about it, but he is very, very nervous.

The taps are all out of work. They don't spill water, at all, only a muddy, gunky liquid that smells like rust. There's no hope of purifying it. Everything outside is dried up, and there's no hope of getting water from a river or a stream. Not where they are, in the middle of a suburban nightmare.

Dream sees the twenty gallons, and slowly releases a breath.

He starts rationing it out, scribbling numbers and portions out, for the first time that George has seen him do it.

Outside. The word burns on his lips like nothing ever has. *Outside. There has to be more outside. I know there is.*

George suspects Dream is thinking the same thing.

He dreams about the cabin in the woods again.

This time, it's raining in his dream. He turns his face towards the sky, tilts his head back, feels the freshwater patter on his skin. It's funny. Before, he was never the type for rain. He preferred the dry weather. Now, there's nothing he wouldn't give to feel the rain again.

The air is clean and fresh after the rainstorm. He can smell that wonderful scent that comes after the rain. The plants are blooming. One of them is just a sprout, poking its head up from the carpet of pine needles. George bends down, runs a hand over it. He wants to uproot it and take it back to him and Dream. Maybe they could grow it there. Something alive. Something real.

He wakes up.

He never mentions the dreams to Dream, never. He doesn't know if Dream has the same dreams as he does, or if his dreams are the same shapeless, nightmarish ones that George used to have before meeting another survivor.

He doesn't ask. But he suspects that he already knows the answer.

George peels the splint from Dream's wrist and is very pleased to see that the swelling has gone down. He instructs Dream to sit and try not to move as George takes a cotton ball of rubbing alcohol and cleans the scratches and wounds that are still scabbed over. He tells Dream to let them air, and to take the splints on his fingers off when they no longer hurt.

He doesn't know much about first aid, but he knows the basics, and he can tell that Dream is irritated with it. That he doesn't like being told what to do.

They sit together for a long, long time.

Eventually Dream falls asleep with his head in George's lap. George brushes his hair off his

forehead, counts the freckles on his cheeks. He makes it to forty five before he, too, is asleep.

Somehow they find each other in the middle of the night, faces illuminated by the yellow lantern in the center of the room, and it's one of the nights where they've slept in the same corner, curled together as one. George looks at him, Dream looks back, and it's almost shy, almost sweet. Like they're both figuring it out together, clumsy and unpolished and new. Their hands find each other's faces, their bodies find each other, cupping each other like flower petals. They kiss until both of them can only see each other.

Dream breathes, George breathes, and they go back to sleeping.

In the morning, they barely mention it.

At night, they kiss again.

Dream says, one day, "Outside."

It's just one word, but George can tell how terrifying it is for Dream to say it. George has been outside; he made the trek from his previous home to this supermarket three separate times, and managed to survive each time. He knows what it's like, and how to protect himself, and what to do with his injuries and burns and blisters later on. Dream, who has never left the supermarket once in the entire time George has known him, has no idea what the outside is like.

"Outside," George repeats for confirmation, and Dream nods. "Do you want to go?"

"Maybe," Dream says. "I don't know. Not for long. But you've done it, right? You've been out there a lot."

"It's bad," George says slowly, not wanting to sugarcoat it. "But you can protect yourself. Long sleeves, pants, gloves, a mask. And I've never gotten injured before, not seriously. Only minor burns. It's like a bad sunburn in a way."

"We have lots of aloe vera."

George nods. "And lots of layers."

Slowly, very slowly, Dream says, "I think it would be worth a try."

George nods. Dream nods. There's a thin strand connecting them, something that's much stronger than before. George thinks he might call it *determination*.

They go outside.

Only for a moment. The briefest moment.

George puts his mask back on and his goggles and gloves, and makes sure to put his hands in his pockets so they don't blister over. Dream does the same. He's shaking, even though he tries to hide it.

George proposes the simplest of ideas. He will stand by the door and hold it open, and Dream can take a few steps outside before returning. That way Dream will know that going outside is a possibility and not a death sentence. George will prove that the doors will remain open for Dream.

It happens. It lasts for all of two minutes. Dream comes back inside, turns away from George, and tries to hide the sweet rush of relief that washes over him, even though it is so evident to George.

"Not a death sentence," George says, with pride. "It's possible."

"I know," Dream says, and for the first time since George has known him, he sees something bloom in his eyes.

Hope.

Hope. Determination. They're both there. George will make sure they stay.

They kiss again, this time in the daylight, by the bedding section where they've taken all their blankets and pillows from. Right after they've brushed their teeth, too, with the endless supply of toothpaste they have from the toiletries section, so both of them smell clean and fresh and taste like mint. They kiss each other all day, and at this point George isn't sure whether it's because they're both so starved for human connection that they're turning to each other or because they're inextricably tied to each other.

He suspects that it is a mixture of both.

There isn't a moment where they aren't together, not one. Always, in some way, they're touching. The barest bumping of shoulders as they walk. Legs pressed together, one line from thigh to ankle, while they're eating their microwave dinners. It's a thing of luxury for George, these dinners. There's something about them that promises good things.

It's interesting how in an apocalypse, the smallest things become the largest. A child's crayon drawing, folded so many times that George knows the creases by heart and the paper has become as soft as fabric. Someone's pill bottle, the label faded and nearly whited out, but proves that someone once took those medications, someone who was once alive. A silver spoon, long since tarnished by the air. He goes to a perfume section one day and sprays all of them into the air, just to breathe something different.

The microwave dinners are the same. They promise a better tomorrow.

The smallest things are the largest. Dream's pinky, hooked in his own as they walk back to the storage room. The gentle, slow breathing of them both as they fall asleep. The lantern in the center of the room that never flickers. The yellow light it gives off.

They wake up to a nightmare.

The power is out.

It's light enough from the daylight that they can both see clearly, albeit some of the aisles and corridors are shadowed and darker than usual. Dream looks up at the ceiling and George can hear him talking to himself, counting out the ceiling tiles, one after the other, and he reaches the hundreds before he stops.

"They'll go back on," George says.

He doesn't mean to lie, but he does anyway.

The lights do not come back on the next day, nor the day after that.

In a fit of panic Dream takes half of the flashlights and lanterns that they still have and puts batteries in all of them, lights up the storage room so much that George sees red through his eyelids when he closes them.

He can't fall asleep. Dream must know that. But Dream isn't asleep either.

Into the bright lights, he hears Dream say, "He left at night."

George opens his eyes, head on Dream's chest, and doesn't say anything. He gives the slightest movement, just enough so that Dream can acknowledge that he's awake.

"It was dark," Dream recalls, and each word comes slowly to him, like he's fighting to form each one. "It was very dark."

Abruptly, George understands.

He finds Dream the next day sitting by the doors, curled in one of the patches of sunlight that shines through the thick paneling. George joins him in silence and they soak up the sunlight, lying there like cats, until dusk fades.

"What if there are other people?"

Dream is making peanut butter crackers, and it takes him a few moments to respond. "I think we would have found them by now."

"Or they would have found us," George points out.

"Either way, that doesn't mean they're out there."

"There has to be more," George says. "There must be other people who have survived. Maybe there are people just like us, only in the next town over. There are Walmarts everywhere, there

must be more of us.”

“Even if there are,” Dream says, “How would we get to them? We can’t walk, not long distances. We can’t drive, none of the cars work.”

It’s a very isolating apocalypse. George has been made aware of that many times. In movies, television shows, even books, there was always a way for people to go outside and to communicate. At least in zombie apocalypses, people band together. They become groups, become families.

This life is terrible and much, much worse. If you’re alone, you’re alone for good. There’s not much else you can do.

“I think we should try,” George says.

Not only for the hope of more human connection, but because the sickening reality is rising up on them. They’re running out of water. They’re running out of food. The power is out, all the lights are off, and batteries are running out in quick supply. They need more. They desperately need more.

They’re survivors. The both of them.

But the thought of not surviving is terrifying.

Dream looks around, swallows thickly, and George can tell exactly what he’s thinking about.

“We can go to my old house,” George says. “It’s a short walk. I know where it is, we can take shortcuts.”

Dream’s knee bounces. His finger taps. He stares down at the food in his hands like it’s the last thing he might ever see.

He says, “Okay.”

They go.

They return.

They see no survivors.

A cabin in the woods. A grove of pine trees. A valley filled with plants and water. The scent of cedar floorboards. Windchimes, ringing in the air. The wind, blowing through the windows.

He wakes up, looks around at their storage room, untangles himself from Dream. He does his best not to wake him, and Dream curls into the spot George has left empty without noticing.

It's barely dawn, and there's nothing outside, not even the slightest breath of wind. George puts on his gloves, his mask, his hat, pulls a jacket over his already long sleeves, puts his hands in his pockets, and edges open the door.

Astonishingly, it's somewhat colder than usual. George doesn't know what day it is, he doesn't know the month, he's not sure if he knows the year. But he does know that it must be somewhat close to fall or winter, because it's still scorching hot but George can tell the difference in air temperature.

He looks up through his goggles, sees the red hot sun beating down on him, thinks about a child's scribbled yellow sun in the corner with a smiley face.

He picks a direction and starts walking. He makes it three blocks before he can feel his skin start to burn, even through the layers, and has to turn back. At this point the sun is well over the horizon line, and it's much hotter. The supermarket doors are unlocked, and George opens them, edges inside, and peels off his mask and gloves and jacket with sickening relief. He's soaked through with sweat, like he always is whenever he leaves. But the supermarket is large enough that the air is much cooler inside.

He makes his way back to the storage room and hopes that Dream is still asleep. On the walk he realizes, much too late, that if Dream is awake, he probably terrified him out of his mind. He should have left a message, or a note, or something that signaled he was alive and going to return.

He enters the storage room.

It's empty.

Fuck.

"Dream?" George calls. No response. Louder, even though it hurts his throat to shout, "Dream!"

Silence.

"Dream!" George screams, and it rips at his throat, "Dream, are you here?"

Nothing.

"Dream!" George shouts, "Dream!"

He shouts himself hoarse, until no sound comes from his throat at all.

He is alone.

It feels like going backwards in time. He talks to himself over and over to make sure he doesn't forget how to speak again. He walks around and around. He's not sure how many days it's been. He keeps all the flashlights on.

For the first time, he thinks he might understand the smallest piece of the overwhelming, terrifying fear Dream must have felt when Sapnap left. Just the tiniest bit.

Minutes. Hours. Days. He doesn't know how many it's been.

Dream must have left to find him.

Why else would he have gone?

Come back, come back, come back.

Please.

He does.

He comes back.

"Dream," George says, in hopeless, boundless relief, and bowls him over in a hug, holding him so tightly that he never wants to let go. "You're back, you're back, you're back."

"George," Dream says brokenly, and holds him just as tight. Dream is still in his jacket and long sleeves. George is in his pajamas. They stand there for a long, long moment, right by the doors, right in the warm sunlight. George can feel Dream's heart beating rapidly, ear to his chest.

It takes ages, eons, lifetimes before slowly, they part. George stares at him. He reaches out a hand, touches Dream's face. Like he can't believe he's real, like he can't believe that he exists.

"I'm sorry," George says, and his face is wet, "I should have left you a message, I should have said something, anything, I swear, I only went three blocks and then came back, I never left—"

"I went looking for you," Dream says, and he holds tight to George's hands, both of them white-knuckled and desperate. "I was looking for a long time, and—"

"I know," George whispers. "I'm sorry."

And Dream continues, finishing his sentence like George had never spoken, "I found him."

“Hi,” says a new voice, coming from behind Dream.

George lets go of Dream’s hand, and someone steps out from behind Dream, just barely taller than George is, and gives a small, sheepish wave. “Nice to meet you. I’m Sapnap.”

Everything stops, like the scratching of a record player. George’s heart jumps. “You’re Sapnap?”

Sapnap grins. “The one and only.”

“There are so many more people,” Dream blurts, and this time his hands are shaking, but from excitement, “So many more of us, even though we had no idea, but Sapnap found them, and they’re all living together.”

“And if you wanted,” Sapnap adds, “You could come. Both of you.”

“Both of us,” George repeats. Numbly.

He looks from Dream to Sapnap back to Dream, and tries to make sense of everything, because after so many days of being alone, so many hours spent in awful silence, only his voice for company, and now everything he knows and understands has been flipped on its end.

At once, the greatness of the situation strikes George.

There are people.

There are survivors.

He’s already met two. And according to them both, there are so many more.

“Yes,” he says, because it had never really been a question in the first place. “I want to go.”

Dream has vanished down one of the aisles to go pack his things, and that leaves George and Sapnap alone together, sitting by the entrance. George tries not to stare. There’s something about Sapnap that makes perfect sense. The way he looks, maybe. The way his voice sounds. It aligns perfectly with the rare details that Dream has offered him.

Sapnap breaks the silence and says, “You’re George, huh?”

George nods. “That’s me.”

“You must be really special to him,” Sapnap says abruptly.

“Hm?”

“He wouldn’t stop talking about you,” Sapnap says. “When we first found each other again.”

“Oh,” George says, flustered. “That’s nice of him.”

“Yeah. It is.”

“It’s just been the two of us,” George tries to explain, holding his hands up in the air as if it will help, “For months, I’ve never seen anyone but him. He’s important to me too.”

“I know,” Sapnap says, and then he laughs, and George gets the sense that Sapnap was a person born to laugh, to be happy, because it fits so well on him, this version of a smile. “I know what that feels like. I know Dream.”

“He missed you a lot,” George says. “It took him so long to tell me about you.”

“That’s Dream for you.”

“I’ve never seen him happier,” George says. “Than just now, when he came back with you.”

They sit in silence and stare at the far wall.

“I don’t know what I would have done without him,” George continues quietly. “I think I might’ve lost my mind.”

“How long were you alone?”

“A few months at the beginning,” George says. “And then a few days at the end.”

Sapnap doesn’t say anything for a long time.

“Dream’s a survivor,” Sapnap says eventually. “He’s the person keeping me alive.”

“Me too,” George agrees. “I honestly would have no idea how to live without him.”

Neither of them say anything for a long, long moment. George stretches his legs out, realizes he’s still in pajamas, and should probably go to change. He’s about to push himself up from the ground, go and pack his things as well, when Sapnap breaks the silence.

“So,” Sapnap says, “Are you two fucking?”

George nearly chokes on his own spit. “What?”

Sapnap grins. “That’s enough for me.”

George stares at his feet, face hot, flushed with embarrassment, and fights the urge to bury his head in his hands. Sapnap smiles, overly pleased with himself, and nudges him in the side.

“Go and grab your things,” he says. “We should be leaving soon.”

George leaves behind the crayon drawing. He leaves it folded on the shelf, the paper nearly see through from how many times he’s run his hands over it, and next to it he leaves a note. He writes a message for whoever might find it next.

He is sure that someone will find it. There will be someone else who finds this supermarket as a safe haven.

“Ready?” Dream says. He has a backpack with everything he needs in it. Clothes, toiletries, personal belongings. Sapnap has assured both of them that with everyone else, they have things figured out. They have places to be.

“Ready,” George says.

He thinks about the cabin in the woods. He looks from Sapnap to Dream, walking side by side, conversation bouncing back and forth quicker than George can follow, lightning in a thunderstorm. The sun casts long shadows on them both, soaking through his clothes to his skin, but George can deal with the temporary stinging. He trails behind them. Only slightly. His mind is stuck on cedar floorboards, a winding river, a sprout just beginning to bloom.

“George?” Dream says, and falls back to walk in step with him, “Are you okay?”

George nods.

He’s never been more okay.

I’m on my way.

End Notes

that's a wrap on september prompt week!! and goddamn, im never gonna do something like this again w/o writing in advance, this was so brutal. im very grateful for the dt safespace server who gave me lots of motivation n encouragement to finish these pieces, you guys are incredible <3

if you enjoyed, please leave kudos or comments!! i love to hear all your thoughts.

Works inspired by this one

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